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Curtis retires from role working to protect Whitefish Lake

By HEIDI DESCH
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When Lori Curtis was working on her master's thesis project she discovered the Whitefish Lake Institute and for the last 10 years, she's been working for the same nonprofit on a variety of watershed issues that impact the lake and beyond.

Curtis recently retired from the nonprofit as its science and education director. Though she worked on many projects and took on many roles with the nonprofit, Curtis says there's been a few accomplishments that have been highlights of the past decade.

In 2015, WLI released the A Status of the Whitefish Lake Watershed and Surrounding Area. The report paints a picture of the health of the watershed, which includes Whitefish Lake.

Curtis says it's one of the projects she's most proud to have worked on through WLI.

"By doing that we really gathered and presented the cultural and natural history of the lake, along with gathering the data of every agency that had worked with Whitefish Lake," she said. "It was good to create that boat anchor for the lake."



Lori Curtis recently retired as the science and education director for the Whitefish Lake Institute. (Heidi Desch/Whitefish Pilot)

Another highlight has been working on developing the WLI's Living Wetlands Interpretive Nature Trail in the roughly 28-acre Averill's Viking Creek Wetland Preserve. Hundreds of young students come through the preserve through WLI educational programs.

"The second thing I'm

most proud of is educating our youth and the hundreds of students that we've been able to take outdoors. Because of the things they've learned in nature I hope that they can be the stewards for the future."

Curtis earned a master of science degree from Green Mountain College in 2010.

Her graduate thesis resulted in the "The Flathead Watershed Sourcebook – A Guide to an Extraordinary Place." Her work on the book earned her the Outstanding Outdoor Writer Award from the Montana Chapter of the American Fisheries Society for her work on the Sourcebook.

Earning her master's and working for an environmental nonprofit were a second-career of sorts for Curtis. She had previously earned a business degree and worked in jobs in a variety of areas including banking and precious metals, as a headhunter for the computer industry, in piano parts and supplies sales, as a publisher's assistant and started a boutique marketing public relations firm.

When she began working on her master's degree her goal was to use her experience to work in the world of conservation. She found that her background served her well working at a nonprofit with a small staff.

"I'm not an expert at many things, but I'm an expert at organizing and problem solving," she says with a laugh.

Moving from the private corporate world to nonprofit science, which often works with government agencies,

Curtis said has been difficult to adjust to a slower timeline for work to be accomplished.

As an example, Curtis points to the WLI's work in 2012 that confirmed previous data that failing septic systems around Whitefish Lake are a cause for concern when it comes to contamination of the lake and water quality.

"We weren't necessarily successful in having all septic tanks replaced, but we have moved that forward and really started the conversation," she said. "That issue has become the focus of the Flathead Basin Commission. That's been an accomplishment because we've been able to move the conversation."

Curtis says advocating for water quality can be particularly difficult when lakes appear to be clean. Though she says Whitefish is particularly supportive, the work often means bringing the community into the conversations and providing education about issues.

"With lakes, it's what you can't see that you have to worry about," she said. "You hope that you can make people see lakes differently so they make sure to work to have some control over what's happening."